

PLOTS Praise

Hunters Satisfied With Access Program

By Ron Wilson

Hunters are satisfied – some more than others – with a nearly decade-old program that provides walk-in access on hundreds of thousands of privately owned acres in North Dakota.

In a 2005 survey on the State Game and Fish Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen program, both resident and nonresident hunters indicated their approval of a program that has opened up 900,000 acres and counting.

The 2005 survey, which dealt solely with the views of those who actually hunted PLOTS, was the first of its kind. A follow-up survey for the 2006 hunting season is in the works. "One season's worth of survey is good, but two will be better," said Kevin Kading, who oversees the PLOTS program as the Department's private land section leader.

Reasons for the survey were simple: To confirm the direction the Department is headed with the PLOTS program is in line with public sentiment. Plus, to garner feedback to help guide the hunter access program into the future. "While you think what you're doing is the right thing, it's important to have this kind of data to back it up," Kading said.

To some, PLOTS is simply land – unmistakably marked by inverted triangular yellow signs – where a person can hunt on foot without having to ask a landowner for permission. To others, it's that, plus an effort by wildlife managers to address the problem of places to hunt becoming harder and harder to come by in North Dakota.

"At first, people weren't real sure about the program, in part, because I think many people thought funding was coming out of taxpayers' pockets," said Casey Anderson, Department PLI field operations coordinator, on a program the bulk of which is funded by license sales. "It's gained acceptance from landowners, the public has become more comfortable with the program, and the hunting public is satisfied."

The PLOTS program is partly responsible for getting some hunters out of the house and into the field more often than maybe they would have otherwise. About one-third of the survey respondents agreed that PLOTS increased the number of days they spent hunting, while about 46 percent said they'd hunt pheasants – the most pursued species on PLOTS – less if the program did not exist.

"Having that kind of information from the PLOTS survey tells us it's important to provide people a place to hunt," said Randy Kreil, Department wildlife division chief.

Survey respondents hunted PLOTS for a variety of reasons including private land was posted; no access to private land; PLOTS was close to home; limited amount of time to hunt; and so on.



TIM JOHNSON

Most hunters pursue upland game birds on Private Land Open Sportsmen. Even so, Sandra Hagen, Bismarck, took this mule deer doe on a PLOTS tract in western North Dakota.

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Kading said the survey solidifies that PLOTS is an important part of North Dakota's hunting landscape and the state could lose hunters without it. He said this is important to keep in mind as some wildlife agencies across the country are scrambling to bolster dwindling hunter ranks. "We've always wondered if hunters were taking advantage of PLOTS just because they are there, or if hunters sought them out on purpose, or just bumped across them while out hunting," he said. "No matter the reason, it appears it's gotten some people off the couch and out hunting, and that's important."

The PLOTS program is successful, and will likely meet the 1 million acre enrollment goal earlier than the 2009 deadline. Even so, there are concerns among Department wildlife managers about creating a generation of hunters who hunt exclusively on public land in a state where the majority of the land is privately owned.

"While the Department believes the PLOTS program is very important for hunting opportunities, we need to continue to remind people about the need to work with private landowners to gain access because that's where the most hunting opportunities exist in a state that's 95 percent privately owned," Kreil said. "If people limit themselves to PLOTS and other public lands, they will be missing out on good opportunities and may become frustrated with increased competition and reduced game numbers on public areas."

The PLOTS program simply cannot provide hunting opportunities for all resident and nonresidents hunters, Kreil said. "PLOTS is a place to start, but not the end all," he said.

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What's lost when raising a generation of hunters who hunt exclusively on public land, some wildlife managers believe, is the connection between urban-living hunters and landowners who live on the land.

The Game and Fish Department's PLOTS program is popular among hunters in a state where 95 percent of the land is privately owned.



CRAIG BIRHLE

Survey Highlights:

- Survey response rates for residents, 33 percent.
- Survey response rates for nonresidents, 41 percent.
- 53 percent of resident survey respondents hunted PLOTS.
- 53 percent of nonresident survey respondents hunted PLOTS.
- Residents spent about 26 percent of their time hunting PLOTS.
- Nonresidents spent about 34 percent of their time hunting PLOTS.
- Residents indicated moderate to heavy pressure on PLOTS.
- Nonresidents indicated light to moderate pressure on PLOTS.
- Both residents and nonresidents indicated the quality of PLOTS was satisfactory or very satisfactory.
- About one-third of respondents agree that PLOTS increased the number of days they spent hunting.
- Pheasants were the most pursued species on PLOTS by both residents and nonresidents.
- Residents indicated big game was the second most pursued species on PLOTS.
- 46.5 percent of respondents who hunted PLOTS indicated they would hunt less for pheasants if the PLOTS program did not exist.
- Many respondents indicated posted private land and the ease and simplicity of PLOTS as the reason they hunted PLOTS.



Lisa Bjerklie of Bismarck with some ring-necked pheasants – the most hunted species on PLOTS.

landowners who live on the land. “If people stop trying to communicate and stop building relationships with private landowners, they’re missing an opportunity to understand the agriculture community, which is the economic and social foundation of North Dakota,” Kreil said. “There is a real chasm between the agriculture community and people who live in the state’s large communities, and that gap will continue to grow

unless urban-dwelling hunters make an effort at meeting and understanding how the farm and ranch community functions.”

Even if some hunters in search of places to hunt are uncomfortable knocking on a landowner’s door, maybe there’s another approach for people to help lessen the gulf between landowners and hunters. “You can say thanks to the landowners who have enrolled their land in the PLOTS program,” Kading said. “People need to realize that even though they’re hunting on PLOTS, they’re hunting on private land. Without the landowners, there wouldn’t be PLOTS.”

When the Department’s PLOTS program reaches its 1 million acre objective, it doesn’t end there, however, as there is always turnover as contracts expire. “When we reach 1 million acres, the plan is to go back and improve the habitat quality on existing PLOTS,” Kading said.

That’s essential, Kreil said. “It’s simply not enough to have 1 million acres of PLOTS ... you have to have 1 million acres of quality habitat,” he said.

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

CRP Game Plan

The primary focus for the Department’s private land section in 2007 is the Conservation Reserve Program.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s reenrollment and extension process provides an excellent opportunity for Department private land biologists to work with producers who have CRP set to expire between 2007-10, said Kevin Kading, Game and Fish private land section leader.

The Game and Fish Department is offering incentives to producers who reenroll or extend their CRP contracts and enter into the Department’s Private Land Open To Sportsmen program. In addition to reenrolled or extended CRP, incentives will be offered to producers to keep their land in grass, even if they do not put it back into CRP. Since August 2006, the Department has added 15,000 CRP acres to the PLOTS program.

By offering incentives and securing PLOTS agreements with producers who keep their land in CRP, the Department is essentially able to “bank ahead” acres of habitat and public access for longer periods of time, Kading said. CRP already contains the necessary habitat base for a quality PLOTS tract, so securing this habitat, as well as public access, is important to the hunter access program.